

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00
INRE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 SSM-03 /074 W
-----111794 232254Z /61

O 232153Z JAN 78
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 787
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 1029

JERUSALEM FOR USDEL

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: IS EG PBOR PEPR
SUBJ: PUBLIC REACTION TO BREAK IN NEGOTIATIONS

1. SUMMARY: THE DECISION JANUARY 22 BY THE ISRAELIS
CABINET TO HOLD-OFF ON FURTHER MEETINGS OF THE MILITARY
COMMITTEE ACCURATELY REFLECTS THE AMBIVALENCE OF MOST
ISRAELIS -- THAT BEGIN HAD TO INDICATE HIS DISPLEASURE
WITH SADAT'S JANUARY 21 SPEECH BUT NOT CLOSE THE DOOR
COMPLETELY. AS ISRAELIS UNEASILY REFLECT ON THE EVENTS
OF THE PAST WEEK AND ON WHAT LIES AHEAD, TWO OTHER
THEMES ARE BEGINNING TO BE HEARD: THAT THE SETTLEMENTS IN
THE RAFAH AREA SHOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO BLOCK PROGRESS
TOWARD PEACE AND FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE PEACE
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PROCESS BEGAN, MURMURS ARE HEARD THAT BEGIN'S LEADERSHIP
IS BEING QUESTIONED WITHIN THE COALITION. END SUMMARY

2. THE STRONGLY WORDED STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE CABINET
AT THE CONCLUSION OF ITS WEEKLY MEETING JANUARY 22 IS
PROBABLY AN ACCURATE REFLECTION OF THE VIEW PREVAILING
IN THE COUNTRY. MOST ISRAELIS PROBABLY AGREE WITH THE

PRIME MINISTER THAT HE HAD NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO RESPOND TO SADAT'S ASSEMBLY SPEECH SATURDAY NIGHT -- A SPEECH WHICH IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO HAVE BEEN TOUGH AND UNCOMPROMISING -- ALTHOUGH, AS NOTED BY MANY PRESS EDITORIALS, SADAT DID NOT REFER TO THE PLO NOR TO THE FUTURE OF EAST JERUSALEM. THE DECISION TO POSTPONE THE DECISION REGARDING WEIZMAN'S RETURN TO CAIRO FOR DISCUSSIONS IN THE MILITARY COMMITTEE IS ACCEPTED BY MOST ISRAELIS AS THE BEST WAY TO INDICATE ISRAEL'S DISPLEASURE WITH RECENT EGYPTIAN MOVES AND AT THE SAME TIME ENSURE THAT THE DOOR REMAINS SOMEWHAT OPEN.

3. A PHRASE IN A COMMENTARY IN TODAY'S JERUSALEM POST -- "SEVERAL SETTLEMENTS WITH A FEW HUNDRED FAMILIES IN RAFAH AND YAMIT" -- CHARACTERIZES THE DISQUIET OF MANY ISRAELIS REGARDING THE POLITICAL POWER OF A FEW SETTLEMENTS AT RAFAH. THE THRUST OF THE COMMENTARY IS THAT THESE RELATIVELY FEW SETTLEMENTS SHOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO BLOCK PROGRESS TOWARD PEACE AND WE BELIEVE THIS IS AN ASSESSMENT WHICH WOULD BE SHARED BY MANY ISRAELIS. IT SHOULD BE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT MOST ISRAELIS WOULD DISTINGUISH BETWEEN SETTLEMENTS IN THE NORTHERN SINAI AND THOSE IN WEST BANK; THE LATTER WOULD BE DEFENDED MORE VIGOROUSLY IN ANY NEGOTIATIONS. ISRAELIS ARE NEVERTHELESS BEGINNING TO FOCUS MORE ON THE SECURITY ASPECTS OF THE RAFAH APPROACHES, AS DISTINCT FROM THE SETTLEMENTS THEMSELVES.

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4. THIS CONCOMITANT YEARNING FOR PEACE AND CONCERN FOR SECURITY MAY EXPLAIN AN AMBIVALENCE ON THE VIEW OF SETTLEMENTS AS IN THE MORE GENERAL AREA OF ISRAELI/EGYPTIAN RELATIONS. A POLL PUBLISHED YESTERDAY BY THE CENTER FOR APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH AT HEBREW UNIVERSITY INDICATES THAT 72 PERCENT OF THE RESPONDENTS ARE OPPOSED TO THE POSSIBILITY OF LEAVING THE RAFAH SETTLEMENTS OUTSIDE ISRAELI BORDERS. THE SAME POLL SHOWED THAT 60 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS ARE OPPOSED TO FURTHER SETTLEMENTS ACTIVITY IN THE TERRITORIES DURING A PERIOD OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT. THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THESE TWO RESPONSES ILLUSTRATES THE DIFFICULTY ISRAELIS HAVE IN RECONCILING THEIR FEELING THAT SETTLERS SHOULD NOT BE ABANDONED WITH THEIR HOPE THAT SETTLEMENTS ACTIVITY WILL NOT DISRUPT NEGOTIATIONS. IN GENERAL, IT CAN BE SAID THAT MORE AND MORE ISRAELIS ARE TENDING TOWARD THE VIEW THAT SETTLEMENTS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES MAY INDEED BE "OBSTACLES TO PEACE" BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, THEY ARE NOT SURE HOW BEST TO PROCEED TO OVERCOME THOSE OBSTACLES WITHOUT ABANDONING IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES. HEREIN LIES THE RUB AND THE CENTRAL REASON FOR THE DEVELOPING AMBIVALENCE WE SENSE CONCERNING THE PROBLEM.

5. WE ALSO INCREASINGLY DISCERN A NAGGING CONCERN REGARDING BEGIN'S LEADERSHIP. PARADOXICALLY, THIS IS MOST EVIDENT AMONG HIS COALITION PARTNERS; PERES HAS REFRAINED FROM CRITICISM AND GOLDA THIS WEEKEND REACTED SHARPLY TO WHAT SHE CONSIDERED EGYPTIAN INSULTS OF BEGIN. BUT, WITHIN THE COALITION WE HAVE BEGUN TO HEAR MURMURS OF DISCONTENT FROM DMC AND THE LIBERALS. FOR EXAMPLE, IN A MEETING OF LIBERAL LEADERS WITH EHRLICH ON JANUARY 19, SEVERAL OF THOSE PRESENT QUESTIONED BEGIN'S EMOTIONALISM DISPLAYED IN HIS DINNER SPEECH LAST WEEK AND IN HIS GENERAL INSENSITIVITY TO ISRAEL'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE.

6. THE INCIPIENT CONCERN WITH BEGIN'S LEADERSHIP IS PAR-
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TICULARLY NOTICEABLE WITH REGARD, AGAIN, TO THE ISSUE OF SETTLEMENTS; HERE HIS STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS REFLECT HIS INABILITY OR UNWILLINGNESS TO DEAL WITH RELIGIOUS AND NATIONALIST MILITANTS. BEGIN COULD EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH THESE MILITANTS, BUT THAT WOULD BEST BE DONE BY SHIFTING FROM HIS PRESENT RELIANCE ON HERUT/NRP HARDLINERS TO A MORE FLEXIBLE LIBERAL/DMC GROUPING. HE IS RELUCTANT TO DO THIS BECAUSE OF THE IMPACT ON HIS LOYAL FOLLOWERS AND BECAUSE OF HIS PERSONAL BELIEFS. IN SUM, WHILE THERE IS NO THREAT TO BEGIN NOR ANYTHING APPROACHING A REVOLT, THE PRESENT PERIOD OF PUBLIC NERVOUSNESS AND APPREHENSION INEVITABLY SPILLS OVER ON TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS PERFORMANCE. LEWIS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: NEGOTIATIONS, PEACE TALKS, PUBLIC ATTITUDES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 23 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TELAV01029
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780034-0571
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780132/aaaabauo.tel
Line Count: 149
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: c8f324e1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 25 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3728505
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: PUBLIC REACTION TO BREAK IN NEGOTIATIONS
TAGS: PBOR, PEPR, IS, EG
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/c8f324e1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014